

Sal Rose, Mt Albert

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By [Ewan McDonald](#)

John Palino looks like a nice guy. Not like, say, a Glasgow Rangers fullback. And he sounds like one too, at least on his TV3 programme, *The Kitchen Job*, which is to say that he doesn't rant and swear like Gordon Ramsay, who was a Rangers footballer and puts the boot into under-performing restaurants on his TV programme, *Kitchen Nightmares*. Palino's programme is the local version.

What qualifies Palino to dish out advice on fixin' other folks' restaurants is that he's been in the business since he was a twinkle in ...

Dad ran a catering business, son wanted to study the restaurant business at uni. Dad objected, so son took up acting, ended up working in a restaurant in Beverly Hills, serving the actors. Moved back East, married a Kiwi, came to Auckland and set up Sal Rose, named after his parents, almost four years ago.

So, we frightfully clever folk at Viva brainstormed. We'll do a *Kitchen Job* on his place just off Mt Albert Rd – a suburb that has fewer than its share of restaurants you'd want to eat in.

Palino reckons you should look at a restaurant from the road. We did. It's big. Can cater, it claims, for up to 200 at a sitting (and standing). Decor largely dark wood, more dark wood and booths, old family and movie-star photos.

Then we did surveillance. Okay, we read online reviews from some locals who like the place for its lack of pretension and its food and service, and other locals who gripe about the food and service. That's online reviews for you.

It's a family and friends sort of place: we went with friends, Kelly and Sinead. We arrived separately but neither couple was greeted at the door. I mention this because John got mildly upset about that at the restaurant he warmed over in last week's episode.

Sal Rose is branded "Italian Country". I'm going to pick a fight and say, "Yeah, if Italy has extended its borders to New Jersey", because this is pure Italian-American cuisine, otherwise known as "red sauce food", for reasons I don't have to explain: you only have to look at Sinead's eggplant parmigiana, pictured. You'll also see spaghetti on the side, which you wouldn't in Italy.

Understandable. Palino is from New Jersey, *The Sopranos* country. However, proclaiming "Sal Rose is

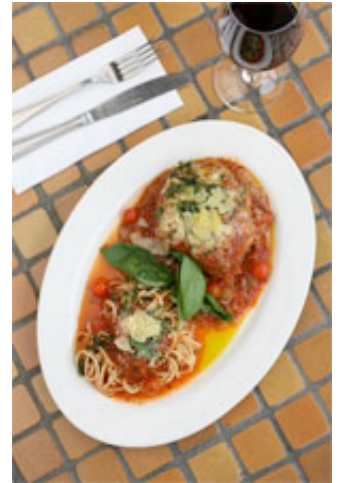


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dedicated to bringing home-style Central and Southern Italian cuisine to the Auckland area. Sal Rose comes with a history of real Italian heritage and Grandma's recipes" is pushing the boat out. About 100 years.

Four of us ate three courses, big meals; I'm not going to chronicle every jot, tittle, herb and spice. Standouts were a simple fresh spinach, pear, walnut and balsamic salad; spot-on gnocchi with mild blue cheese sauce; Kelly's pan-fried terakihi, the ever-present tomato sauce cut with garlic, olives and capers, Jude chose eye fillet. Fish and flesh were generous servings, cooked as asked, tender and juicy.

Service was frequent, unflustered, informative, could have been warmer. The waitress showed good knowledge of a 12-page wine list touching many Downunder yards and a fair whack from the Old Country (not New Jersey).

If this were The Kitchen Job, what would we counsel John Palino to change about Sal Rose? Not a lot, because this restaurant knows what it wants to be and does it very well, and the local audience likes it. Both parties obey the First Commandment of the successful suburban eatery's Bible: it keeps its promises and they keep coming back.

For me, therein lies a potential problem. The menu hasn't and doesn't change – it's largely as I remember from a visit too many months ago. It's more than competently cooked, but I'd like to feel energy, excitement and flair from the kitchen.

There's a nod towards a specials board but I'd guarantee the punters could handle more innovation. You're allowed that, even in red-sauce cuisine. That's how a "traditional Italian" dish like tiramisu was invented after WWII